

# Jerry's kids

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The repetitive patterns in rock and the blues are really not that far removed from the drumming that many "primitive" societies employ for social and religious purposes. The steadily increasing popularity of "jam bands"--improvisational groups that build their musical explorations on a foundation of those rhythms--is an undeniable pop culture trend, the next microcosm to be blown all out of proportion by the greater, stimulus-hungry culture. It's a culture that seeks a return to the life that the rhythms hint at, and it's no accident that the cradle of this musical (at least) direction was the boho/beatnik Valhalla of San Francisco over 30 years ago, the birthplace of the genre's most enduring example, the Grateful Dead. The Dead took the almost-shamanistic properties of the groove and built an entire empire upon it, far outdistancing contemporaries like Quicksilver Messenger Service. Now, since the death of Jerry Garcia eliminated the Dead as a concert draw, a large audience with considerable disposable income (and a yawning void in their lives) is up for grabs. The loss of the Dead as a defining force has left the genre--like a plot of ground from which a tall shade tree has been removed--full of life and fresh growth. Catalyzed by the H.O.R.D.E. tours, the bands that sprang up in the Dead's wake share certain traits. Many aspects of the Dead scene--fanatical and interconnected followings, audience taping of shows and the detailed archiving it inspires--have since become standard for the genre, and it's hard now to tell the players without a scorecard. With this in mind, we'd like to offer the following guide to the most relevant examples of the type, starting with some of the most popular:

**Widespread Panic:** Formed in Athens, Georgia, this sextet is just now pulling up behind front-runners Phish. With roots close to classic Southern bands, this two-guitar, two-drummer aggregation is a bit more accessible than the dense, convoluted Phish. Still, their momentum has built more slowly: While Phish's Texas dates this summer saw them playing Starplex, Panic played the Bronco Bowl.

Both bands have attracted Dead-level devotion: cadres of tapers and fans who base some part of their lives on hearing the music, merrily traipsing from show to show. Mindful of the negative effects of the Dead's audience--or rather, the scam artists and pleasure cruisers that followed the band but seldom saw a show--both groups regard their surging popularity with caution.

"On the one hand, it's good," says Panic bassist Dave Schools. "We have more and more fans following the band. On the other hand, we've gotten more and more people who just show up [at concerts] to make money by selling drugs--or T-shirts, or whatever--in the parking lot. Eventually things get out of hand, just like with the Dead or Phish, and it gets to the point where a band can't hardly tour. But touring is what we're all about, so we're gonna try and not put ourselves in that position."

Schools notes that in this age of co-dependency, AIDS, full awareness of the deleterious effects of drugs and alcohol, sexual harassment, and decreased economic options, many of the old kicks have

been phased out. "What else gives you a sense of adventure these days?" he asks. "Rock climbing? Maybe, but most all of those rocks have already been climbed. The last real adventure is to get on out there, on the road with some of your friends and see what happens. Following a band's schedule can be crazy."

Widespread Panic may often sound close to its Southeastern antecedents--groups like the Allman Brothers and Sea Level--but they don't consider themselves a "Southern rock band." "They're our forefathers, obviously," Schools admits. "But the only thing that makes us a 'Southern rock' band is the fact that we're from the South, and we rock. There are certain cliches associated with Southern rock that we're not a part of, even though we are guitar-oriented." He pauses for a second. "I don't know what we are; we've just been doing what we've been doing for 10 years."

"When we were playing the clubs, we met bands like Phish and Blues Traveler," Schools explains. "Then the H.O.R.D.E. thing developed, and that was a success." Unfortunately, the once-cool H.O.R.D.E. has followed other big multi-act tours like Lollapalooza in veering from a semi-adventurous path and onto the hard, reliable tarmac required to make money. Panic fans (called "Spreadheads") were overjoyed when Widespread was announced as a keystone band for this year's H.O.R.D.E. tour, then dismayed when the band pulled out in a dispute over what has usually been attributed to their place in the lineup. The result was that a Panic-less H.O.R.D.E., one of its big punches pulled, didn't even visit Texas this year. Widespread has since severed their connections with the event.

"We had to pull away from the whole H.O.R.D.E. thing due to the nature of its success," Schools explains. "It had become a commercial entity." When asked if he thought that the tour had become about something more than music, he emits a disgusted snort. "Totally about more than music," he replies.

Schools sees the growth of band-followers and tape traders as part of a natural search for identity and belonging in a world disinclined to provide such things. "The greater community's been splintered into a million different factions, with a million different choices. Where do you go?" he asks, noting that being the focus of such a need does place a burden on the musicians. "Sure," he says. "It drives me insane sometimes, especially when it happens away from a concert venue. But that's what we're here to do, to satisfy that want. We have a need and a want ourselves, and that's to play music together; if you're satisfying somebody else's needs and wants by doing that, then boy howdy, we both win, don't we?"

Panic, like many extemporaneous bands, receives a lot of attention for the covers they play; shows that fall on holidays are also deemed significant. Perhaps no recent show has better mixed these two tendencies than the band's Halloween show in New Orleans at the University of New Orleans' Lakefront Arena. Among the covers were versions of Blue Oyster Cult's "Godzilla," the Who's "Long Live Rock," and the Doors' "L.A. Woman."

Although Schools seems almost constantly on guard against reading too much into what Widespread does--he continually says things like "we're just a band" or "we just play"--he admits that on Halloween, things are different. "Usually we're not saying much more than we really like a song, but you can see a theme through the Halloween covers."

He elaborates. "The whole 'Godzilla' thing was Spinal Tap, a joke that very few people got. We were basically making fun: We had this six-inch tall Godzilla which we lowered on a tiny li'l thread while we were playing, and we had these two guys running around trying to get it just right, dressed up as Thing 1 and Thing 2 from Dr. Seuss. In a giant arena, it was a perfect moment." While Schools is reluctant to call such a move a dialogue--"I think we basically do it more to amuse ourselves"--he will, with prodding, admit that "there are always many levels" to the band's performance.

The group recognizes the audience's expectations. "Everyone looks at [Halloween] as a special show," Schools says, "so we do our part; we wear our costumes." Schools was Jack the Ripper, and lead singer John Bell--who had just finished reading *A Confederacy of Dunces*--was outfitted as Ignatius J. Reilly, the novel's hero.

This may sound similar to the capering that Phish indulges in, but it's actually quite a bit less structured than Gamehenge, which forms the basis of a Tolkien-esque mythos for hard-core Phish Heads. "They had a plan," Schools says of Phish. "We don't have a plan, except to play music. That [Gamehenge] is something for the Phish freaks to hold onto; with us, you just don't know what we're going to play or how we're going to play it. We're six completely different guys with our own way of doing things. That's Widespread Panic."

Although many of the jam bands chafe at allusions to the Dead (Phish in particular), Schools--a self-confessed Deadhead--is mindful of the problems that the Dead experienced as their popularity (and venues) grew. On the plus side, "things sound a lot better" at the arena level, he notes. "They smell a lot better too," he adds with a chuckle. "We don't get that beer-Lysol-and-vomit smell when we play anymore. It's more the smell of frying light cels [colored sheets of celluloid used to alter the light cast by stage lights, which are quite hot] and what's cooking for dinner."

The band is very aware of the need for control. Almost all official--and quite a few unofficial--communications contain an exhortation to "keep the scene clean." "We have to worry about it," Schools declares. "Our shows don't sell out that far in advance yet, and we don't have thousands of kids following us from show to show like Phish does. It seems that the scene that killed the Dead just kind of glommed onto Phish."

Phish's misfortune has worked to Widespread's advantage. "It's taken a lot of the heat off of us," Schools says. "The kids who do our tours are just so happy, they're in heaven. They'll try to keep those Phish kids away. When they [itinerant Phish fans] show up at a Panic show and just hang out in the parking lot and try to sell their wares--and not even go to the show--that really pisses off some of these Panic kids."

Like the Dead scene of the '60s and '70s--before the mainstream discovered the band--the WP scene is self-contained and close to self-cleaning. "A lot of the real scenesters, who've been making the shows for a couple years, are very guarded; they don't tell anybody about this band. It's their little thing," Schools says. "We end up with what's like this little private guard that makes sure the lot stays clean and that we don't have any dumb-asses openly dealing drugs; that way, the venue stays happy. Then, even if we don't sell out, we can always come back and maybe sell out next time; if not, we can come back again. The point is that people can show up at the parking lot at six in the morning, getting ready to have their fun, and the venue people don't worry."

Schools thinks the root of the problem lies in statistics rather than the music or the kind of folks it attracts. "More numbers equal more potential for trouble," he says. "When you start selling out big arenas, more bad things are bound to happen, like the Who in Cincinnati [the 1979 general admission concert at Riverside Coliseum where 11 people were trampled to death or crushed]. What we're trying to do is groom everything as it goes--and grows--along, and kind of keep it pointed in a natural direction."

So far it seems to be working. "Even if it gets a little crazy at times," Schools says, "it still feels good, like, 'look what we've inspired.'"

Although WP made their name through relentless touring, 1998 will mark a change of pace. "We're gonna take some time off," Schools announces. "We have a new rehearsal space that's much larger and much more conducive to getting back down to what it was to write songs with Widespread Panic ten years ago, that living-room feel." The hirsute bassist is also looking forward to a return to more of a family vibe. "We're really psyched about the opportunity to get together. When you're doing 250 shows a year, and you finally get home, it's like, hmm, I could spend time with my family, or I could choose to be with these guys that I just spent 250 days with. Now, it's down to 120 dates a year, with a live record coming out in April [1998] and a European tour coming up; it's all looking real good. When we go to Europe, hopefully we'll be inspired to write a bunch of new material."

The road wasn't good for Widespread's songwriting process. All songwriting credits go to the band, and each member contributes whatever he wants to, or can. "Sometimes someone might bring in an almost-whole idea, arranged and everything," Schools explains. "Other times, I might just bring in three riffs I've come up with and ask which one is best and which one should be saved for a bridge. Then we hammer it out. It's just hard to do that at sound check, which is where we found ourselves doing it the last couple of years."

Schools finds no mystery behind the phenomenal growth of jam bands and the taper culture that follows them. "I think people just enjoy music being created," he says. "If you were at a show, it might be a special moment for you that you want to relive. I understand that, because it's like that for me, too: I collect Dead tapes, old Weather Report tapes with Jaco Pastorius playing, whatever I can get my hands on that I like, which leans toward instrumental improvisation and jazz. That stuff is different every night, which is what makes it collectible and why taping's such a big thing, because people are trying to catch these moments of improvisation, like little gems."

Widespread Panic returns to the Bronco Bowl Friday, November 21.

Phish: The pride of Vermont, where in 1983 they were formed at the University of, Phish is arguably the oldest of the second jamming generation and the first to achieve Dead-level momentum. They were also the first to experience Dead-level problems; almost immediately after Jerry Garcia's demise in 1995, most, if not all, of the Dead's "problem children"--the scruffy, ticketless, dope-dealing, one-finger-in-the-air-holding, car-burglarizing, whining mass of dead weight and bad publicity--leapt onto Phish like a mouse on cheese.

It didn't really follow; besides a taste for free-form, exploratory playing and traditional American underpinning (usually hidden but most evident when the band would set aside their instruments for an a cappella version of some ancient chestnut like "Goodnight Irene," "Uncle Pen," or "Amazing

Grace"), Phish's virtuoso approach was closer to that of prog-rockers than the Dead's electric jug band. Produced by four musicians--all inclined to see their instrument as a solo tool--Phish's detailed sonic filigree and fugue-like complexity often betray the training and compositional skills of its members. Not only that, but the Phish cosmology (based on a song cycle called Gamehenge that formed the basis for an internal logic which--like the game of cribbage--is totally impenetrable to the casual observer) wasn't (and still isn't) exactly virgin-friendly.

However, Phish makes unprecedented efforts to connect with their audiences, and usually succeeds, but the avenues they pursue--chess games played with the audiences on a giant chessboard, mass instructions for audience behavior--are fairly cerebral and not exactly geared to the attention span of someone who answers the question "venture capitalism?" with the phrase "toast on a stick, only a buck. Please? Dude?" Nevertheless, Phish remains burdened.

In March of 1993, Phish's show at Deep Ellum Live hardly filled the place; three years later--after Garcia's death--they had leapfrogged up several orders of magnitude, selling out the considerably larger Will Rogers Auditorium in Fort Worth. There were at least a thousand ticketless "miracle" deadbeats stumbling around the venue with dopey fingers upraised.

Earlier that same year--1996--Phish played New Orleans' Jazzfest, and the Crescent City was anything but the Big Easy for the band. Although they count many erudite, well-behaved (if a bit obsessive) people among their audience, it is the crustier Phish fans that the normally laid-back residents of New Orleans recall. "Ugliest people I ever saw," a man scooping out a cooling mango freeze opined at this year's Festival. "Dirty, too."

"They just saw their band, then they left," the woman at his elbow added in a tone of voice that indicated that this lack of appreciation was far more offensive than all the public excretion, illegal parking, garbage dumping, and general moochery that plagued the area combined. In a voice that no doubt haunted the Dead the last decade of their existence, she added, "I hope they never come back."

Sadly, Phish possess real skill and feeling, and a sense of humor as well. They bounce on trampolines and break up their precisely written and delivered originals with covers like ZZ Top's "Jesus Just Left Chicago" and the Violent Femmes' "Blister in the Sun." Ben and Jerry have named an ice-cream flavor after the band, just as they did for another artist that Phish would just as soon have go unmentioned. Their last stop through town--July 25 at Starplex--was absolutely incendiary, full of accomplished fury and stunningly good. At the end of this year, they will fill Madison Square Garden three nights in a row, yet most people's enduring image of them (in New Orleans, at least) will still be an unwashed runaway on Ecstasy in their front yard, trying vainly to tie a bandanna around the neck of a panicked, flea-bitten dog.

The Black Crowes: Few bands function as a vehicle for past styles like the Atlanta-based Crowes. Fewer still manage to escape detection, but the Crowes--founded in 1984 by guiding lights Chris and Rich Robinson--have managed to inject enough personal energy (principally through Kinks-like brother-on-brother feuds) into their presentation to avoid coming off as just the sum of their influences. Keepers of the Ron Wood-Keith Richards bar-band chug-along during a time when that style had little appeal, the Crowes broke big in 1991 with "Hard to Handle," the Otis Redding chestnut that incidentally was a Dead staple during their Pigpen [Ron McKernan]-fronted, acid-

fried R&B band days. Vocal marijuana fans, the Crowes are also notable for their sense of rock style: an amalgam of skinny shirtless guys in velvet jackets, tight pants, and silly hats that would do Ritchie Blackmore or Ron Wood proud. Although they got off to a good start, the band seems lately to have fallen upon shaky, contentious times. Original bassist Johnny Colt has recently split from the group, and guitarist Marc Ford--on board since 1992--left/was kicked out this August.

Blues Traveler: Of course the magic of pulling off improvisation--what really makes those successful moments sing--is that 90 percent of the time it's aimless bullshit. The mirror in which every other jam band looks good and the Q.E.D. proof of exposition's tendency toward mediocrity is Blues Traveler, the luckiest band in the world. Frontman John Popper cuts an odd, disturbing figure. His habit of wearing a World War II-vintage infantryman's cartridge belt around his neck in order to house his harmonicas was at first an interesting trademark. Now that he's graduated to black leather replicas of that system--and festooned them with samurai swords, flashlights, and what looks like all manner of camping gear--his harp harness merely seems a creepy manifestation of rock star fetishism and indulgence. This impression does not go well with the band's very public infatuation with firearms, particularly pistols (handguns are like drugs and/or hot coffee enemas: if people know you like them, they probably know too much). Popper's "harness" is not only creepy, but hard on the ears: along with its other accoutrements it still keeps a wide array of mouth organs handy, and Popper's aggressive, tootling ineptitude on the harmonica is one of the few things more annoying than his contrived, Cat Stevens-like vocal delivery.

Live, the band cops bland boogie-riffs, a study in the kind of turgid churn you'd expect from a washing machine. Chan Kinchla is a member--if not the president-for-life--of the hair-whipping, pose-copping, face-making school of guitar; if he didn't play so long, his histrionics might distract the listener from the fact that he's an utterly average player. Still, in this era of limited resources, you have to admire the mileage Kinchla seems determined to wring from the three or four ideas that he has. Like many improvisational acts, BT's fans all agree that the band's albums don't do their concerts justice, which in this instance is a truly terrifying concept. Although the band's latest release--this year's *Straight On Till Morning*--shows improvement, the same might be said for an abscess; you still wouldn't want it in your ear.

The Allman Brothers: True, their appeal lies mostly in the recollection of past glories--they started around the same time as the Dead--but their creative peak was powerful enough that they still resonate today. The band seems now to have a kind of tissue memory for the process by which they pull long lengths of chain like "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed" and "Whipping Post" through an audience, often with surprising power and poise.

Neil Young and Crazy Horse: Although he started out as a folkie in the late '60s, Young has grown into the image of an extended, extemporaneous player, substituting grinding, jerky, almost epileptic solos played extremely loud for the pastoral flow and spacy beauty that many improvisational acts go for. Now, he's no stranger to the 14-minute song or the six-minute lead break--the very rock that the House of Jam is built upon.

The minor leagues

These bands are still battling it up from the local levels and relegated to off-nights and smaller venues on the road. As such, they are an excellent bargain and may just--in a few years--bestow upon the lucky listener unlimited "I saw 'em back when..." rights.

Colonel Bruce Hampton: Currently of the Fiji Mariners, late of the Aquarium Rescue Unit, regularly thanked on the liner notes of Widespread Panic albums, Atlanta's Col. Bruce Hampton sings like Captain Beefheart and writes songs like Frank Zappa with just a dash of Spike Jones and Wild Man Fisher thrown in. With a career that stretches back to 1965, Hampton's been in more bands than some people have been in pants and was one of the first to blend performance art with rock, inventing instruments (the hecklephone, the chazoid) in order to get his musical ideas across. Another early H.O.R.D.E. act, Hampton has been a major influence on musicians in the southeastern part of the country, blending southern-fried boogie, jazz, and plain old weirdness into a surprisingly accessible--yet still challenging--whole. His extensive career is fairly well represented by several albums currently available: *Fiji*, by the Fiji Mariners, a band driven in part by the band's half-Fijian keyboard players' exploration of his native music, and two Capricorn releases with the A.R.U.: 1992's eponymous album and '93's *Mirrors of Embarrassment*. *Strange Voices (Landslide)* is a good sampling of his work from 1977 to 1987. For daunting oddness check out the Columbia/Legacy reissue of the Hampton Grease band's 1971 double album *Music to Eat*, then imagine how it went over in a year that saw Donny Osmond's "Go Away Little Girl" in the No. 1 spot (it was supposedly Columbia's second-worst-selling album ever, beaten out of the basement by a yoga record). Hampton is for the most part too weird to dance to but essential nonetheless; he'll be in Austin Thursday, December 4, at the Mercury Theatre.

Anders Osborne: This New Orleans musician may just be the next big taper hero. Schooled both in the rhythms of the town's history (Dixieland, blues, jazz) and its first pop generation (the Meters, Allen Toussaint, etc.), Osborne is equally comfortable handling the intimacy of a lone guitar or the irresistible momentum of a big, percussion-heavy rock band. He's more of a singer-songwriter and less of a rhythm-heavy dance inciter, but "Burnin' on the Inside"--off of his 1995 album *Which Way to Here*--moves from the ears to the feet like a lava flow. His last show at the Caravan of Dreams was amazing.

The Radiators: Another New Orleans band, the Rads got together in 1978 and got their most significant exposure to date in 1988 when the title track to *Law of the Fish* enjoyed a bit of radio popularity. That album--a collection of long-time live crowd pleasers like "Doctor, Doctor" and a hymn to crawdad consumption titled "Suck the Head"--was polished but true to their sweaty live shows. Since their inception, the Radiators have been the epitome of a jam band--heavy on rhythm, flying without a clearly defined set list, and a dancer's band--that toured relentlessly, particularly on the East Coast. In 1995 they released *New Dark Ages*, their first studio album in four years. They'll be at the House of Blues the weekend of November 21 and 22.

moe: Think of near-jazzy virtuosity saved from stern, Zappa-esque fascism by a heavy dose of NRBQ-style playfulness, and you're getting close to moe. This quartet's last Dallas appearance was an under-attended but enthusiastic barn-burner. The band can sound very Phish-y at times (check out "Rebubula" and "Spine of a Dog" off of last year's *no doy*, the album by which most folks know them), especially in their vocal harmonies and the complex, clockwork riff-turning, but their jazzbo soloing is held in check with a sense of crunch that might--at times--make Humble Pie proud. These "Merry Danksters" have appeared on both the *Further* tour and the post-tour compilation album and have a new album, *She Sends Me*, due out soon. Their southern tour will only bring them as close to Dallas as New Orleans, where they'll appear on November 19.

The Grapes: This band is a study in the more lyrical, on-the-wings-of-a-breeze type jam-pop: try to picture Blind Melon with a clue. The upfront piano presence recalls Bruce Hornsby. Their best-known album, 1995's *Private Stock*, has just been complemented by this September's *Juice Live* on Deep South Records.

There are a host of lesser lights amid the brighter stars of the improvisational rock universe, acts that are not quite as essential or influential but still worthy of note. Among these are the Samples; Carlos Santana; the Freddy Jones Band (not the Dallas-area jazz guys); God Street Wine; Leftover Salmon; the Dave Matthews Band; Medeski, Martin, and Wood; Rusted Root; Big Head Todd and the Monsters; and Gov't Mule.